

Different agendas, one goal: How Nigerians united to #EndSARS

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Different activist communities came together to create one of the greatest social movements in Nigeria's history.

When Adaeze Feyisayo, 24, joined the protests against police brutality in Nigeria on Friday, October 3, she had just returned from a trip to the southeastern city of Aba, where she went to visit her friend, Tina*.

On her way back, at one of the police checkpoints in between Aba and Umuahia - where Feyisayo, a lawyer and writer, lives - the taxi she and Tina were riding in was stopped.

The policeman in charge singled Feyisayo out from the other passengers.

"He searched my luggage as if he was looking for something but I wasn't bothered because there was nothing there," she says. "After a few minutes, he reluctantly let us go. As we drove off, Tina* told me she suspected that the policeman had just profiled me as a prostitute because of my blonde haircut and, if he had found condoms or drugs on me, he would have arrested me."

At first, Feyisayo thought this was odd. But after reading similar accounts, she realised the policeman's actions were far from unusual.

"When the protests started, a doctor on Twitter shared her story of how she was arrested by the police because they found condoms in her bag," she says now. "I began to understand how police brutality really affects everyone regardless of social status. They detained her even after she explained that she was a doctor. It's things like these that made me join the protests."

Feyisayo started by protesting against police brutality online - using the hashtag #EndSARS along with tens of thousands of fellow Nigerians. They were trying to summon up an international audience, and signing petitions aimed at banning Nigerian government officials from international travel as a way to demand accountability. People created templates for others to use to send emails to international regulatory bodies asking them to come to Nigeria's aid.

The #EndSARS [protests](#) had initially been sparked by outrage over the death of a young man who was shot dead in Delta state. A video of the incident went viral and sparked a movement calling for an end to police brutality and bad governance in Nigeria. Protests quickly descended into violence when police forces hit back, such as during the Lekki massacre in October when they opened fire on peaceful protesters at the Lekki toll gate in Lagos. Authorities have still not disclosed the number of casualties.

Like other young people in Nigeria, Feyisayo was fired up by what she perceived as the injustice and heavy-handed use of force and oppression by police forces and, especially by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) against ordinary people.

During a year working for the National Youth Service Corps (NSYC), from November 2019 to October 2020, Feyisayo worked with a team of lawyers on the Abia State Attorney General's Prison Decongestion project – a series of state-sanctioned efforts aimed at depopulating Abia state's correctional centres. "During this time, I was exposed to the level of damage the judicial system sustains due to police brutality," she says.

She explains how lawyers and NSYC members like her have worked relentlessly to secure the release of people who have been remanded without trial.

"People are thrown in jail on the whims of policemen and certain privileged citizens, populating cells while ministries of justice across Nigeria are left to deal with an overflow of cases. Quite often, there are cases that have been filed in the wrong courts. When you follow such cases up, you find that it was filed by some greedy policemen who were not given [enough of a] bribe. So, when the #EndSARS protests started on October 3, I knew I had to be a part of it."

Providing safety and care

Within the first two days of the protests, Feyisayo, who, as a lawyer, focuses particularly on feminist issues and queer activism, says she saw a need for funds specifically for queer Nigerians who were protesting. "It was important to me that queer people were also given funds to sustain the protests. Police brutality affects us, too. As a feminine-presenting queer woman, I could be stopped for looking like a prostitute. My phone could be searched and pictures of my lover and I could be used as a reason to arrest me," she says.

"Queer Nigerians are often targeted by the police for looking too 'masculine' as a woman or too 'feminine' as a man. They are harassed, extorted and sometimes, arrested.

"Some people are even too afraid to tell their stories because of the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act that has essentially legalised violence against queer people. #EndSARS is our fight too, but to participate in sustaining the movement, we needed funds."

To help queer activists join the protests, Feyisayo decided to start Safe Hquse, an initiative aimed at rescuing and providing support for queer folks who were in distress as a result of the protests. "When the Lekki massacre happened in October 2020, for example, we paid for treatment for three gunshot wound surgeries and bought antidepressants and inhalers for people who needed them," she says.

"We also took care of the full treatment and aftercare for a sexual violence survivor. It was a lot of emotionally tasking work but I am honoured to have been able to help."

Feyisayo and her Safe Hquse team put out a call for donations on social media and were able to raise over nine million naira (\$23,300) for online protesters who needed to pay for internet data to keep conversations trending, and for physical protesters who needed money to get to the protest grounds in their cities, or for those who had been harmed. The donations, she says, were the result of a community effort by queer people living in Nigeria, members of the diaspora and allies who related to the cause.

Feyisayo and other activists like her say they believe that the individuals who lived in precolonial African societies had a greater awareness that their survival depended on the survival of the other people within their community. White supremacy aided by capitalism, she says, gave rise to the idea that people living within a particular community needed to compete among themselves to have better lives, with the white man – and his social capital – as the "standard" to aim for.

This manifested in many ways, including the creation of social classes and, with it, the struggle for social mobility. During the protests this year, however, activists believe there has been a shift back towards more traditional community values. On many occasions, Nigerians have turned to the online community to raise funds for needs ranging from tuition, to rent, to replacing lost or damaged items - and their calls have been answered.

Some Nigerians who announced the loss of their jobs on the internet were immediately offered new job opportunities from strangers.

“Nigerians are falling back on themselves for survival and basic needs because things don’t function like they ought to. Look at the education system. You can pass the entry exam at the university of your choice with flying colours, but you may not get admitted if you don’t know someone in the school who can help you,” says Ehi Enabs, a 27-year-old data scientist who studies internet behaviour. She says that collective survival - an acquired skill for young Nigerians - has set the format through which the protests have been organised and run.

One movement

The #EndSARS movement, made up of a diverse group of people with a common goal, has allowed people to identify their strengths and build on them, she says.

The Feminist Coalition, a group of young women formed in July 2020 with a mission to champion equality for women in Nigeria, is another example of an organisation that recognised the need for structure in the movement and quickly rose to the occasion, fitting into the role of organising and raising funds to sustain the protests.

This quickly grew into a national network offering social services to citizens of Nigeria - including providing food, shelter, healthcare, physical security and legal aid.

“Every movement has vital roles that need to be occupied to ensure success - from the fundraisers, to medical aids, to lawyers, activists and storytellers. We all have a part to play,” says Nengi Nelson, a 26-year-old photographer and filmmaker based in Lagos.

As part of the Flaneuse workshop - a female perspective on urban planning, organised by Adeola Olagunju in partnership with the Heinrich Boll Foundation - Nelson created a video installation project called Underbridge, in which she looked at how sexual harassment thrives in male-dominated Lagos state because victims are forced to remain silent.

When the protests started in October this year, Nelson moved into the role of documenting them. “I am a storyteller and history has proven that storytelling is an important part of any movement; it serves as a time capsule for future generations,” she says.

Nelson joined the physical protests at Alausa on October 13. In the days that followed, she moved between Allen, Berger, Omole, Opebi and Lekki with the aim of capturing an unbiased account of the events.

She says: “The day I went for the protests at Lekki, I went with a friend, Timi*, who is also a photographer. She drove down to Ikoyi where she parked her car at a friend’s house, then we took a bike down to the toll gate.

“On the days I went for the protests, I would go to at least two spots a day and then end up at Alausa. I was always with Timi. For security reasons, it was best to move around with someone or at least meet up at the protest ground.”

At first, she says, the protests were peaceful and people bonded over their experiences as they marched in the demonstrations. “I have realised people feel closer and want to protect others who share the same goal as they do. In this case, it was the quest to #EndSARS, and knowing that the people present most likely had the same experiences created a sort of kinship among us.

“On the first day I was there, there were people making sure everyone got food. A particular lady, Bola*, made sure the photographers were fed. They were people buying bowls of drinks and water from the hawkers passing by and sharing them out among themselves. People were eager to point you in the direction of whatever you needed.

“New friendships were also formed. It was beautiful to witness.”

She points to the ways that Nigerian photographers who covered the protests looked out for each other: sharing tips on how to shoot on the move and how to protect equipment from rain; and making sure that when they experienced harm, they had access to the medical team on the ground like everyone else. She also talks about a group of Nigerian female photographers called TIWA, which organised a care event for Nigerian photographers who were on the front line, documenting the protests.

“Being a part of TIWA is one of the best decisions I made,” says Nelson. “The event created a safe space for photographers to experience care. There were massages for everyone who attended. There was also food. The best part for me was the group therapy handled by a psychotherapist. Everyone shared stories of how our lives have been since we shot the protests. It was lovely to just connect. I am grateful to everyone on the team that made it possible.”

‘People were simply terrified’

Despite this solidarity and kinship, the protests became deeply traumatic for many. The Mentally Aware Nigeria Initiative (MANI), a youth-run mental health organisation with more than 1,500 volunteers across Nigeria, offers free mental health care. It became especially important during the protests as more people became exposed to trauma.

“We kept getting distress calls directed from the #EndSARS response team during the protests,” says Ifedayo Ward, MANI’s 27-year-old executive director.

“People were afraid for their lives; some experienced panic attacks for the first time during that period. So, one of the first things we did was create a virtual panic card, which had details about how to manage a panic attack, what to do when you see someone experiencing a panic attack and our contact details as well.”

“Even when you are not the one experiencing it, it still affects you,” Ward says. Although she has not been affected by police brutality herself, the experience of her cousin at the hands of police inspired her to join the protests.

“My cousin was arrested on his way to the market and taken all the way from Ajah to Badagry [about 90km away]. The policemen charged him with money laundering. We didn’t even know something like was happening until we got a call from the police command at Badagry. They wanted us to pay two million naira [\$5,250] in exchange for his release. After a few calls to some influential people, he was released for 200,000 naira [\$525].”

Besides her work with MANI for the movement, Ward also joined the protests physically when they started at Alausa in Lagos state on October 7.

Like others, she attests to the sense of community at the protest sites. “I met people who were at the protest ground all day and still continued at night. Elderly folks were not left out as well. Some joined the march while others pledged their support however they could.”

Ward says she made a habit of reaching the convergence point early to help organise things. It was during one of these early starts that she noticed a small gathering of people around a young lady. On probing, she discovered that the young woman, Lade*, was having a panic attack. With the help of a man, Ward had to carry Lade to a corner where she was provided with mental health first aid. When she calmed down, she explained that she had been at the protests every day since it started but that day, the police presence made her panic.

Lade’s panic attack inspired the MANI team to go back to the drawing board and come up with better ways to support Nigerians during these times. Since then, MANI has launched a support team dedicated to the protests.

“At first, we wanted to deploy volunteer psychotherapists to all the protest grounds across the country but, considering the safety of the teammates and the logistics involved, it became more logical to provide these services online,” says Ward. The organisation also adapted its “stranger support initiative”, through which people could send in their phone numbers for therapeutic calls every Friday, to a daily support system.

“We had other campaigns scheduled for October because of World Mental Health Day on October 10 but we had to put everything on hold and focus on putting out content that discusses self-care, managing anxiety attacks, and dealing with survivors’ guilt.”

On October 23, MANI announced a collaboration with the Stand To End Rape Initiative, another youth-led movement working towards advancing gender equality through advocacy, prevention and support. This project will provide long-term mental health support to anyone who has experienced trauma from these protests as well as police brutality in the past.

Other examples of community efforts include Gatefield Nigeria Ltd, a public affairs company that has been raising money for journalists to cover the protests; chefs across the country donating food items to protesters who were marching; and the [candlelight service](#) held in different parts of the world to honour those who have been lost to police brutality.

Communities are not perfect, however. Adaeze Feyisayo says that the queer community still faces many battles for acceptance. “My team and I experienced a lot of violence from members of the queer community. We were harassed, stalked, and bullied, even by people who received funds from Safe Hquse.

“We had cases where people we disbursed funds to through the official Safe Hquse social media accounts would come to our private pages, trying to access more funds posing as other people. I don’t think that is sustainable in the long run.”

There were also reports of queer protesters being [harassed by other protesters](#) for flying the rainbow flag during the march. When members of the Feminist Coalition spoke up in solidarity with queer protesters, they were accused of pushing for “queer rights” – something many Nigerians remain opposed to. Last year, in a social perception survey conducted by the Initiative for Equal Rights, a non-profit organisation, 74 percent of Nigerian respondents agreed that consenting adults in a same-sex relationship should receive a 14-year prison sentence.

During the protests, some women also complained of being sexually harassed by male protesters while marching. This is an issue that must be better handled, says Feyisayo. “Communities have to

be able to adequately address issues and hold individuals accountable for how they perpetuate harm on others within the community.”

‘My first thought was, ‘Is this how I die?’

“The ultimate goal as a Nigerian has to shift from merely surviving oppressive systems towards actually dismantling systems that fail to address society’s needs and replacing them with ones that do,” says Alexandra Maduagwu, a 24-year-old entrepreneur and freelance video editor. She describes herself as “a masculine-presenting woman” who has endured harassment from the Nigerian police because of how she looks.

She says that the last time this happened was in August, when she was with a group of friends in a car driving down the streets of an estate in Ajah, Lagos, where one of them lived.

“I had my head out through the sunroof and my friend was making a video of me dancing to the music. We were just enjoying a lovely Sunday morning when a police van overtook our car and blocked the road. The men jumped out of the van, their guns hanging across their bodies.

“One of them pointed his gun at me. My first thought was, ‘Is this how I die?’ Every time I am stopped by the police, I wonder if it is because of my masculinity which, to most Nigerians, directly translates to lesbianism. So, when the policemen told us that day that they stopped us because we were making videos in the estate and it was not allowed, I asked why they needed guns to tell us that.

“An argument broke out between us - some said the police were right to stop us, that they were protecting the estate while I and the others argued that it was not okay for them to abuse their power like that. My queer friends and I shared our experiences and those of people we knew who had been harassed and extorted for looking gay. That day I realised how deep the social class divide is in Nigeria.”

Maduagwu says she wants to see bridges built between the rich and poor communities of Nigeria to address this.

“A good start would be to acknowledge the effects of economic inequality on the country. With the worsening economic conditions in Nigeria, it has become harder to move upward on the social class ladder and easier to move down. As a result, interactions across classes are plagued with power dynamics. This is evident in the manner in which the invasion of the protests by paid thugs was discussed. Many failed to recognise that they were only products of a failed system and blamed them for their predicament.”

This is why she and other activists like her believe that better political education is needed.

Nelson says: “I need to educate myself about my legal rights as a citizen of Nigeria. I also want to educate others.”

Political sensitisation projects have already begun across Nigeria. For example, FEEDLagos is a soup kitchen initiative that aims to feed 1,000 people a day while educating them about political issues and urging them to participate in ways that advance society in the long term.

In September, the food inflation rate in Nigeria rose to 16 percent, despite the efforts of the government to achieve food sufficiency. [FEEDLagos](#) intends to tackle this by building a chain of soup kitchens across Lagos with the help of vendors living within local communities.

In similar efforts, witty banners written in pidgin English have gone up in strategic places around Lagos. They are targeted at low-income earners, who often have a poor understanding of their rights and how political systems in Nigeria work. These banners point out the disparity of income between lower-class Nigerians and senators, for example. Nigerian [senators](#) are the world's highest-paid while nearly [83 million](#) Nigerians are currently living below the poverty line.

Power to the people

“We have to understand that the journey to mass political awareness in Nigeria is a marathon, not a sprint,” says Maduagwu. “This means that everybody has a role to play in educating the next person about their rights and duties as citizens. It is also important that we move across class and start from the grassroots.”

She also adds that Nigerians need to obtain their permanent voter's cards (PVCs). On November 4, during the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) 2021 budget defence session held before the Senate Committee, Professor Mahmoud Yakubu, the INEC chairman, said that the registration exercise for eligible voters would resume in 2021, ahead of the 2023 general elections.

The general elections are not the only way that Nigerians can push for a change of government, says Maduagwu. Following a debate about social media regulations at the national House of Representatives in late October, Nigerians have started discussing the possibility of recalling elected officials who have not fulfilled their duties on behalf of the electorate adequately.

This month, constituents of Amuwo-Odofin, a local government area in Badagry, Lagos, submitted a notice of petition to recall Mojisola Alli-Macaulay from the Lagos House of Assembly on the grounds that the lawmaker has not represented them well. They did this through Amuwo Odofin Stakeholders Consultative Forum.

“Active participation in the affairs of the state by citizens would keep the government on their toes knowing that the citizens have all the power,” says Nelson.

Nelson adds that teaching history is crucial to the journey towards better governance in Nigeria. “It is important to create an archive that future generations can look at and learn from. The Nigerian government is known to suppress and evade the truth, for instance about the Lekki massacre, so it's important that the right information is protected.

“A better Nigeria for me would be one where people are put first instead of profits,” says Maduagwu. “A place where human life is sacred. One where the people's rights are respected regardless of class, age, sexual orientation, gender and all the divisions colonialism burdened us with.”

** Some names have been changed to protect anonymity.*

Mariam Sule

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